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Walstein, Benjamin – Eulogy, Undated

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BENJAMIN DAVID WALSTEIN
"WE'LL NEVER FORGET YOU"
The dog that I'd had since I was seven years old was killed two and a half weeks before. Things always seem to come in threes, so I guess I should have expected all that was to follow.

A divorced friend of the family had re-married a few years ago and his wife died of cancer four days before. That was the second side of the triangle and I supposed I represseos my thoughts and fears of the third- and worst- side.

Tuesday morning my mother walked into my room. This was unusual because she and my father always leave for work before I awaken, so I knew something was up. "Grab hold," she said and for a moment I thought of my grandmother and then my grandfather and then remembered that their miseries had finally ended. A new fear hit me: the fear of what it could be. All this in the flash of a horrible moment.

Then she sat on the bed and I didn't want to hear whatever it was. I wanted to bury my head in the warm pillow and stay there and not know. I knew it was going to be terrible and while I was running away in those thoughts she shoved it into my face, glaring like a huge ugly sign: "Ben Walstein got killed."

Everything slowed down- as a matter of fact, everything just about stopped altogether. I couldn't breathe and it hurt- oh God it hurt so badly. Finally I pulled my head out of the pillow and managed to ask, "Who?"

Bits and pieces of the diving accident in Florida were related to me- I was shown the article in the morning paper- it was all there in front of me and yet it seemed unreal. I learned all the facts- two other people were killed, one person escaped- and they still had not found the body of the third person, of Ben. A shred of hope. I began entertaining fantasies that maybe he had hit his head on a rock, and was walking around with amnesia or something- hurt, but alive none-the-less.

I began thinking of Ben and how he was too smart to get killed. And that the only times he was ever hurt were when he was helping someone else. Once he and some friends were installing
an antenna on a roof and it exploded. Ben was knocked off the roof by the blast, but climbed back up to help the other guys. He ended up with third-degree burns (they had to peel his shirt off his back at the hospital); the other guys suffered injuries no more serious than bloody noses. And then there was that car accident he had had a couple of months ago. Ben was an honorary deputy of the police department here and had a CB radio in his car. He heard about an accident on it and that help was needed. So, he turned on his portable sirens and went speeding through a red light across a highway. A lady ran into him and his little white Pinto was nearly totalled, but Ben walked away without a scratch. Always helping people.

I got close to Ben in Temple Youth Group. When I first came in, there were only about six members—Ben, who was a year ahead of me, was one of them. The group started doing things that year, and I got very active. I was having a great time at conventions, meeting all the crazy people, and tried to get Ben to go to some. He refused, content to hold the office of Treasurer for our local group. Every year at elections, we skimmed right over that office; it was common knowledge that it was Ben's private territory.

The years passed and we had good times, as well as a few bad ones. We could easily spend hours at a time on the telephone, talking about everything and nothing all at once. Nothing serious ever developed between Ben and me; we were simply and beautifully very close friends. I always had some heart-throb or another from one of the other cities in the youth group's district and he sometimes was tied up with a girl from around here.

When my grandfather from Alabama died, I called Ben and asked him to tell the Rabbi for us; just to let him know and also so he could find someone else to say the Torah blessings that week as my dad was supposed to do it. When I got back from the funeral a few days later, I called Ben to talk since I was pretty down. But when he heard me say "Hi" at the other end of
the phone, he suddenly remembered that he had forgotten to give the Rabbi my message. Ben Walstein didn’t have a vicious bone in his body, but neither did he have a responsible one.

One evening, long after my grandfather’s death, Ben called to say hello at about 6:00. I hinted around that I was starving and would love a steak. A few minutes later, we were headed toward a new steak house in town in his little white Pinto. That was a great night; I think it is the night I remember most fondly when I think of Ben. We were both in college, and Ben was really beginning to grow into a man. My grandmother had died shortly before this, and the talk at dinner turned to death. We only discussed it in terms of old people: my grandparents, his grandmother. But what was said was intelligent, caring, mature conversation. Ben was maturing, growing more serious, and he was one of the most beautiful human beings I have ever had the privilege of knowing.

Ben had a love for life that was hard to match. He delighted in everything from people to music to nature and back again. And he always shared what he had. I still have one of the tapes that he handed to me one day just out of the blue.

Ben and his father landscaped their backyard into an absolute Eden. There is a creek running through it that they dammed up to make a small pond. Beyond the pond is a garden, and the magnificent trees give the yard a brilliant green-ness all year. The view from the living room down to the yard is breathtaking. Many a time I have gone over to say hello to find Ben working back there. He always made a playful fuss over having to do the work, but he loved it.

And Ben loved Israel. Lord, how he loved Israel. He spent a summer there, hitching through the country, learning the language, meeting the people. Israel was something sacred to him, and his optimism for her survival was greater than his optimism for anything else. Whenever the question of whether she would live came up, Ben’s answer always was, “She will.” It was as simple as that.
for him. He knew she would survive, because it was right, and that was reason enough.

When I told him I was going to spend a summer in Israel, he got as excited as I was. He told me places to go and things to see, and told me to be sure and watch out for the Israeli guys. (Sound advice.) He came over a couple of nights after I got home and we had a great time talking about the country. His face lit up so each time Israel was mentioned. My prayers for her are more fervent now because I feel somehow she must survive for Ben.

I did a lot of growing in Israel and really outgrew youth group: that's not good or bad, it is just that I had given three years of active participation and I was ready to go on. I still joined, but did not attend conventions and was not so active in our local group anymore. The funny thing is that right when my interest faltered, Ben's picked up.

Our positions became reversed: he was trying to get me to go to conventions, and I was telling him I did not want to go to conventions. Ben would tell me how much I was missing, and about the great people he was meeting, and all I could do was smile. I loved seeing him get so much out of it. I knew this was one of the things that was helping him grow, and it was beautiful. He would come home from a convention so bubbly and happy that all I could think was, "I told you so, you big ape," always with a warm smile, of course.

All through our years in youth group, we had a tradition of ending meetings with trips to the Dairy Queen, and I always got banana splits. There was a standing joke about the conflict between the ice cream and my constant diets. Ben was a great tease, and every time I placed my order, he would stand back, look me over, shake his head and click his tongue at my "no-no." But after he finished his kidding, he would always seriously add that I was not fat at all, and he liked me just the way I was. Anyway, banana splits and Ben will always go together.
Mom and Dad went to work after telling me about the accident, and making sure I was okay. I drifted back to sleep for a while, then woke up and called my boyfriend in New York. After talking to him for a few minutes, getting calmed a little, I got dressed and went to the Walstein’s. Ben’s big sister Rhonia answered the door and I went in to sit for a while. Mrs. Walstein looked up when I walked in and said, “They just found Ben’s body.”

I went over and held her as she cried. She sobbed that the news had taken away her last shred of hope, and I thought of the fantasies of amnesia I had had earlier. I sat on the sofa next to Jeff, Ben’s brother who is a year younger than I. I could not say anything, so I just sat and sighed, gulping in air, trying to breathe.

After a while, I managed to say I was around if they needed me for anything and please to call me. Then I walked outside and started to sob. I could not stop until after I got home.

I called mom and dad after a while to tell them that they had found the body, and I thought how horribly cold that sounded: “the body.” I kept busy the rest of the day, talking to friends, doing anything to avoid thinking.

The funeral was the next day and my father and I went together. I walked into the funeral home, staring at all the empty questioning faces, and the tears began streaming down my face. It just made no sense to me, “Dear G-d in Heaven, Ben was nineteen years old, and so full of life... it just makes no sense.” Those words echoed through my mind through the entire service.

Rich, my boyfriend and a Rabbinical student, had told me to listen carefully to the Rabbi’s sermon. I had told him I would, and although it was an effort, I managed to do so. Everything that was said was so true; our Rabbi truly loved Ben and it showed in his words. He spoke of Ben’s love for life, and his total selflessness toward others. It sounds trite, but it is so true. Ben was never out to hurt a soul, and was always out to give a smile.

The funeral was huge. Many people whom I did not know were
there: Ben's friends from school and his Dad's office where he worked. And practically the entire Jewish community was there, too. It was as though the whole city were in mourning. They say that we do not weep for the dead; that we weep for our own sorrow at having lost a loved one. But this funeral was not like that; all of us, every one, were weeping for Benjamin David Walstein and all that he had lost. For he had lost his entire life. A life that was beginning to show what great potential it truly held.

At the cemetery, through the whole service, I stared in utter disbelief at the coffin with its Star of David. It just did not seem possible that Ben was inside that horrible box. I stood with the tears streaming down my face, not uttering a sound, until they had lowered him almost the way into the ground.

Later that night, I went to the Walstein's for services. When I walked in the door, Dr. Walstein and I hugged each other and he said, "We both lost a good friend."

"Yes, but we're all going to be okay," was my reply. His next remark showed me his hurt: "Yes, everybody but Ben." I had to say he was wrong, that Ben was okay too, that we were all okay. He finally half-heartedly said alright.

I was determined to be strong. I wanted to be a help to Ben's family and I knew I could not do that by falling apart. We began the service and I realized I could not be strong. At the first mention of "death," my tears began, and by the end of the service, a friend was supporting me. Finally it was over, and the Rabbi was holding me, and I sat down. Ben's sister brought me something to drink, and at that point, I thought, "Oh great, Mindy, some help you are."

I did get hold of myself, though, and talked to Jeff for a while afterward. Mrs. Walstein had said she was a little worried about him, and Rhonda had asked me to look after him here and there, so we talked. It was really good; I needed it as much as Jeff did. He said he had accepted the accident, that
it was meant to be. We helped each other and I will always remember that.

Before I went to sleep that night, I lay in bed for a long time thinking. I thought about what I had said to Dr. Walstein about all of us being alright- Ben included. And suddenly I realized that I did not believe that myself.

I figured it was true about my grandmother and my grandfather, and even about our friend's wife. They had all been suffering, and had all lived good full lives. Ben's life had certainly been good- in terms of what he had had, and in terms of what he had given. But it had not been full, and he had been cheated. I suddenly felt that Ben was very lonely; probably the loneliest person who had ever been. I felt that we all had each other, and that he was off alone somewhere with no one and nothing- just floating in aloneness. I began talking to him, making myself know that yes, he can hear us, and that we can ease his pain. I told him of our love for him, and that Jeff was okay, and again of our love, and that I prayed that he was not so alone as I felt he must be, and yet again of our love. Always of our love. I still talk to him sometimes, and the thought of his terrible aloneness makes me ache as I have never ached before. But somehow I know it is not hopeless; we can make it easier for him.

All during that week, I talked to Ben's Mom and Dad. We got to be very close and I think I did bring some comfort. I got stronger as time went by, and began to get a great deal out of the services held every night. I really paid attention to the words, and thought about them, trying to understand them. I put my entire being into these services and prayers.

The youth group had a district convention scheduled for the next week-end and we were supposed to have the Saturday night
friendship circle and mixer at the Walstein's house. One day when I was talking to Mrs. Walstein, she remarked that she still wanted to have it there. I asked if she was sure, and assured her that it could be changed, but she wouldn't hear of it. She said, "No, I think Ben would want it here, and it will give the kids a chance to extend their condolences if they want." I said okay and that was that. My admiration and love for Mrs. Walstein grew quite a bit that day.

The convention came and so did many of Ben's friends. I had the opportunity to talk with some of them alone and well, there are no words. Dr. Walstein wanted to meet two of Ben's friends from Savannah, and I introduced them to him. It was beautiful. He talked about the phone bill Ben had run up talking with one of them, and somehow we all walked away with tears in our eyes. I had to take some time to sit in the Sanctuary alone, to think, and begin to come to terms with it all. I watched the sun setting behind the windows by the Torah, and thought of Ben. And I knew then that we are all okay—Ben too.

Saturday night came and we went to the Walstein's. I was feeling a bit mellow, and sat sort of away from everyone listening to the Israeli music on the stereo and thinking of Ben. It came time to begin the friendship circle, and I was told we were having it in the backyard. I walked out there and stared at the pond, and the garden, and the trees... the tears came as I thought of Ben working out there and how he had loved it. A gift of rain came and we all began heading inside. A friend talked to me for a couple of minutes and I went in. We held the friendship circle, and began socializing for a while. I saw Dr. Walstein standing at the window, looking down at the yard, and I went over to put my arm around him.

"He helped me build that, you know."

"Yes, I know."
"What were you so upset about out there before?"
All I could do was point outside. There were no words.

He then began telling me of a conversation he had had with a lady who lives here who had also lost a son. He said she had remarked that the hurt never really goes away; you always feel it, but you learn to live with it; you have to go on.

Tonight I attended what I decided was my last youth group meeting. It just does not mean so much as it once did, and it is very empty without Ben.

We have about thirty members now; I do not even know the names of all the younger kids. All the new faces seem very eager to learn from the group, and I look back at my own first experiences, I do not regret any of it and I thank G-d that Ben finally got the full benefits of the friendships to be made there.

As I got up to leave tonight, my eyes hit the shoebox that the Treasurer's books are kept in; it is the same shoebox Ben used all those years and for a moment I expected to see his smiling face behind it. But, well, a new face was there, and I realized that the lady is right. There is always the ache, but there are other people to care for, other things to do. But Ben, you gotta know, we'll never forget you. We'll never forget you.

Mindy Steinberg
June 28, 1975.